

## Tchaikovsky: Russia's Most Popular Composer

To many he was an inspiration; to more he was a legend--Pyotr Tchaikovsky, the great Russian composer. Leaving behind 7 symphonies, 11 operas, 3 ballets, 5 suites, 3 piano concertos, a violin concerto, 11 overtures, 4 cantatas, 20 choral works, 3 string quartets, a string sextet and more than 100 piano pieces, Tchaikovsky undoubtedly left his mark on the world. His strong emotion, appeal to technical skill, and dedicated work habits together give him his claim to fame as the most popular Russian composer of all time.

One could argue that April 25th, 1840 was just an ordinary day in history, but to the music realm this date would serve as a hallmark as the infamous Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky was welcomed to the world. Born in Votkinsk, Russia as the second of six children to Alexander and Ilya Tchaikovsky, Pyotr had shown a clear interest in music from childhood. At just the mere age of four was when the first known attempt of his musical composition occurred, a song written with his younger sister Alexandra. What seemed a small, insignificant work at the time, would serve as the basis of countless pieces he would later compose.

Like many of the most famous composers, Tchaikovsky's family did not deem him to be a music genius until later in life. Instead Tchaikovsky's parents "chose to prepare the high-strung and sensitive boy for a career in the civil service" (Poznansky). Nine years later, Tchaikovsky's mother passed away from cholera; it would be then that Tchaikovsky's father would realize his son's true vocation and enroll him in piano lessons. At 17 the new piano guru would fall for the Italian style music of Luigi Piccioli, and develop a lifelong passion for this Italian flare. Perhaps another most influential man in Tchaikovsky's life was Wolfgang Mozart, as his production of *Don Giovanni* "proved another revelation that deeply affected his musical taste" (Poznansky). The following fall Tchaikovsky would be one of the first to enroll in the prestigious St. Petersburg Conservatory, here he would decide to dedicate his

life to music, resigning from his clerk job and taking full force the music industry. The St. Petersburg Conservatory would claim fame as the place Tchaikovsky would first produce his 1864 piece *The Storm*, a dramatic program music that would serve the first of many mature music compositions.

Short years later, Tchaikovsky would produce his first symphony, *Symphony No 1 in G Minor* and his first operas, *The Voyevoda* and *Romeo and Juliet*. 1871 brought successful performances of his *String Quartet No. 1*, and operas *The Oprichnik*, *The Little Russian* and *Vakula the Smith*, and the acclaimed *Symphony No. 3 in D Major*. The pieces were receiving grand reviews from high priority critics as Tchaikovsky's name was climbing the ladder of the music society. Not all of Tchaikovsky's pieces would receive such radiant feedback though, in February, 1877 the premiere of Tchaikovsky's first of famed ballets—*Swan Lake* would be deemed with meager staging and choreography and later dropped from the repertoire entirely. What was reasoned as a failure in Tchaikovsky's time is considered now “The most successful ballet ever written if measured in terms of broad audience appeal” (Fun Facts).

As a becoming composer, Tchaikovsky's works would again be well received in following years with his pieces *Eugene Onegin*, *Symphony No. 4 in F Minor*, and the *Violin Concerto in D Major*. Tchaikovsky began exploring areas music had yet to trod in, like his *1812 Overture* which commemorates the Russian victory over Napoleon with cannon shots, fireworks, and church bells.

Behind every great composer is a muse that inspires their creativity, and for Tchaikovsky love would be a constant battle against society. In this time in Russia homosexuality was forbidden and even illegal. As Tchaikovsky was now an interest in the eye of the public, he became forced to mask his true desires. This led to the hasty marriage of Atonia Milyukova in 1877, an amateur music student. Tensions would rise within the marriage, and Tchaikovsky's homosexual urges would ultimately cost the two their marriage. Tchaikovsky fled merely six weeks after the wedding never to see Atonia again: “the pair never formally divorced, but arranged a permanent separation” (Fun Facts). Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother about the marriage stating “Only now, especially after the tale of my

marriage have I finally begun to understand that there is nothing more fruitless than not wanting to be that which I am by nature” (Poznansky). Love would strike again for the poor soul in 1876, with the widowed Nadezhda von Meck. Becoming his patroness and arranging him a monthly allowance enabled Tchaikovsky to resign from the conservatory and allocate his time to composing music. Though never physically meeting Nadezhda, Tchaikovsky would dedicate his *Fourth Symphony* to his sole friend.

Tchaikovsky’s love experiences and suppressed homosexuality sparked a surplus of creativity within his works. He would produce three symphonies, two operas, a violin concerto, the notable famous works, *Capriccio italien*, and *Serenade for String in C Major* within just a few short years. As 1885 approached, weary of traveling Tchaikovsky settled outside of Moscow. Instead Tchaikovsky would overcome fear and begin conducting, while producing two more widely popular ballets *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*. After bringing audiences to their feet across the globe, Tchaikovsky would be struck with cholera, an epidemic sweeping his land that would cost him his life. The death of the music mastermind would headline newspapers and “Indeed, his [death] may well be one of the most thoroughly recorded deaths of prominent cultural figures in modern times” (*Tchaikovsky’s Last Days: A Documentary Study* pg. VII). Wild rumors would arise after his passing such as Tchaikovsky’s death being a suicide from fear of a homosexual scandal; that Tchaikovsky was forced to take his own life to save the honor of his family, and that he had been poisoned from orders of Alexander III.

Tchaikovsky led a remarkable journey with marvelous works, whilst facing oppression and harassment from society. One could only argue that Tchaikovsky is incomparable to other Russian composers and can claim the title of ‘most popular Russian composer of all time’. To the outside he may have seemed ordinary, but analyzing the pain, anguish, and ugliness Tchaikovsky faced internally, he still managed to bring beauty to Russia. Tchaikovsky’s strong emotion is felt through his distinct sound, a characteristic most Russian composers cannot claim. Partly, I believe his sound is distinctive due to his background in the St. Petersburg conservatory. Here students learned much of western music theory, and this shines through in his pieces. He brings the best of both worlds, pieces

with Russian character yet an appeal for Western European audiences. Compare this to Rachmanoff or Rimsky-Korsakov, both Russians also, but lacking the western flare Tchaikovsky brought due to their music education in Moscow. His music not only unites styles, but easily translates with audiences. He expresses himself with clear simplicity and contains themes relatable to many; childhood, love stories, etc. Lastly, the title of most popular Russian of all time should be entitled to Tchaikovsky due to his love and homage to his Russian homeland. With dedicated works to his native land, and leaving behind a legacy of 74 pieces, Russians should feel obliged to honor Tchaikovsky as their most popular composer.

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